

# The theatre of medicine

David Heiden



Neighbors watching a “house call” for a patient with malaria. Boo’co Refugee Camp, Somalia, 1982

The drama of a doctor’s work fascinates people. Something real and important is at stake. There’s mystery, and an uncertain outcome. When a doctor works in an accessible real-life setting, at a street-corner accident or a house call, everyone tries to crowd around.

In the refugee camp, we worked in public view. Doctors did the same thing several generations ago in America, when most births and deaths occurred at home. In *The Doctor Stories*, William Carlos Williams even describes an “appendix operation” performed on the kitchen table.

These days, people usually see medicine on TV and not the real thing. When doctoring is done well on TV programs, from *Dr Kildare* and *Marcus Welby* to *ER* and *Chicago Hope*, there are usually good ratings. But something is lost because the real thing is inaccessible. Fantasy and exaggeration replace reality in a way that seems sadly consistent with the rest of our culture.

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